Tennis Legends Ready to Compete in Rye

By PENNY SINGER

PICTURE this: you and your doubles partner, Jimmy Connors, competing on center court at the Westchester Country Club against Bjorn Borg and his partner. Fantasy? No. Fact, if you're willing and able to pay $2,500 for the experience.

Don't despair. There are other opportunities for tennis fans when the Champions Tour returns to the Westchester Country Club in Rye for what will be the second yearly Citibank Champions Tournament Aug. 8 through 13. In addition to watching top players hotly competing in singles and doubles matches, there will also be the chance to take part in one of 20 clinics held by the players each day. An hour and 50 minutes of instruction from the likes of Mr. Borg and others costs $250, said Karen Scott Happer, the tournament director.

"The event represents a whole new concept in tennis," Ms. Happer said. "The matches exhibit an excellent standard of competitive tennis, and what the audience can also enjoy is accessibility to the players. The players on the tour attend all the galas where they will spend a lot of time chatting with people and signing autographs. It's a very unusual occasion."

The Champions Tour, started by Mr. Connors and Raymond Benton three years ago, is, Mr. Connors said in a telephone interview, a professional tennis circuit for players 35 and older. "The level of play is very high," he said. "We have been able to attract the best senior players, and they compete for all they are worth." He added that the field has been expanded every year, from 12 players last year to 16 this season. The players will compete for the $200,000 in prize money, with $50,000 going to the winner of the five-day tournament. In last year's inaugural event, Mr. Connors defeated Mr. Borg in a marathon match. In addition to Mr. Connors and Mr. Borg, players on the tour include the French Open champion Andres Gomez, Tim Wilkinson, Guillermo Vilas, Jose-Luis Clerc, Johan Kreik, Mel Purcell, Eddie Dibbs, Peter Fleming, John Lloyd, Mansour Bahrami, Dick Stockton, Gene Mayer, Hank Pfister and Harold Solomon.

Jimmy Connors returns to Westchester Country Club Aug. 8 for Citibank Champions Tournament.

"It is a tournament field comprised of seven Wimbledon championships, seven French Opens, six U.S.A. Opens and six Australian Opens," said Stephen M. Griffith, director of communications for the Champions Tour. "We're only in our second year, but we have 11 events on the circuit for 1995 and anticipate that the tour could expand to as many as 20 events by 1998."

The Champions Tour, Mr. Griffith said, has won respect from the tennis establishment because of the talent, competitiveness and the marketability of its players.

"The seeding is determined by Nuveen Masters point standings," he said. "They provide a seasonlong ratings of the players based on their performance to date. At the end of the season, the top eight point-standing performers qualify for the $300,000 Nuveen Masters, which is held in Naples, Fla." More than 30,000 people are expected in the audience for this year's tennis champion, he said, which is the only tournament on the circuit in the New York City area.

"Citibank and the presenting sponsor, U.S. News & World Report, is helping to make the tournament a fund-raising event for seven charities and youth organizations in the area," Ms. Happer said. "Each organization is given a special day and evening at the event to use as a fund-raising activity. The money goes to them from the sale of packages and tickets."

The week's activity will begin with a "Vitas for Kids Day," a Vitas Gerulaitis fund-raiser, which includes golf, tennis and a pro-celebrity competition on Aug. 7.

"At the peak of his career, Vitas Gerulaitis established a foundation to run free clinics for the kids of New York City, with the help of players like Arthur Ashe, John McEnroe, Jimmy and Chris Evert," Mr. Griffith said. "And over the years the foundation has given away more than

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10,000 tennis rackets to inner-city kids as well as the clinics."

Mr. Connors said: "As a father, I understand what is involved in making the lives of kids better. It makes me especially interested in helping charities and organizations that come to the aid of children."

Mr. Connors, now in his early 40's, said: "It's not only kids who benefit from tennis, but people of every age. It's a lifelong game. What I remember about the audience in Westchester was the strong interest I saw in people participating, playing tennis.

"The courts at Westchester Country Club last year were full of people who were playing before coming to the event. They know that tennis is more than a spectator sport. It's something enjoyable that people can do on their own and improve their health in doing it."

For the second year, Mr. Connors, Mr. Borg and Mr. Lloyd will take part in the efforts of a locally based charity to raise money. The March of Dimes, which has its headquarters in White Plains, will hold its fund-raising event, a Dazzling Evening at Wimbledon, on Aug. 9, with all the top players in attendance. The evening will begin with a Meet the Player's cocktail reception at 6 followed by a match at 7:30. Ticket prices are $100 for the reception and tennis or $50 for tennis alone.

"The March of Dimes hopes to sell 300 tickets," said Dr. Jennifer Howse, president of the March of Dimes. "Elle and Mirabella magazines are title sponsors, and the Brookhill Group, a Westchester-based firm, is our support sponsor. This is such a great opportunity for us to participate in an event with so many of America's tennis legends. They help us create greater public awareness of our mission."

Proceeds from a Dazzling Evening at Wimbledon will support the March of Dimes Campaign for Healthier Babies, which Dr. Howse said is a "nationwide initiative aimed at improving the quality of prenatal care, which increases the health of babies by preventing birth defects and infant mortality." She added, "The March of Dimes finances programs of research, community service, advocacy and education."

"For $500, we can buy prenatal care for a pregnant woman," she said. "In a recent survey we found out that most women don't even know that a daily vitamin containing folic acid can tremendously reduce their risk of having a baby with serious birth defects of the brain and spine." The other charities to benefit from the Citibank Champions are the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation, Graham-Windam Services, a children's services organization; Lehman College, the Junior Tennis Foundation and Friends of Karen, which helps children with life-threatening illnesses.

Reserve seats for the Citibank Championship event range from $15 to $40 depending on the evening. For tickets and information the number is 921-1170, Ms. Happer. For reservations to the March of Dimes Dazzling Evening at Wimbledon, the number is 997-4728. ■

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